DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 233 095 UD 022 892

AUTHOR Li, Gertraude Roth
TITLE The Challenge of Sponsorship.
INSTITUTION World Relief Corp., Nyack, NY.
PUB DATE Jun 83
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Culture Conflict; Culture Contact; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Refugees
IDENTIFIERS *Sponsors

ABSTRACT

This paper provides general information on how to sponsor refugees who wish to relocate in the United States. The two primary goals of sponsorship are defined as giving the refugees freedom and leading them to self-sufficiency. It is suggested that, if the sponsoring family does not know the language of the refugees, one member of the family being sponsored should be literate. In addition, a bilingual dictionary should also be available in order to facilitate communication. It is also recommended that sponsors acquaint themselves with the history, culture, politics, and the circumstances leading to the displacement of the refugees from their countries. Due to cultural differences, it is explained, some refugees put their sponsors in a paternal/maternal role situation in which a suggestion can be misinterpreted as a command; this attitude, however, should not be perceived as weakness on the part of the refugee. Mutual respect for the feelings of each party is stressed as being essential for a good sponsor-refugee relationship. In helping refugees to find work, sponsors are called upon to emphasize the American work ethic as well as the idea that welfare or other public assistance should be viewed only as a temporary measure. Finally, it is recommended that sponsors be aware of and address cultural differences that may affect the adjustment of refugees from other countries. (AOS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

World Relief

ED233095

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Gertraude R. Li
World Relief
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
  Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

The Challenge of Sponsorship

by
Gertraude Roth Li, Ph.D.
June 1983

UD 023 292

World Relief Corporation – Refugee Services Division
P.O. Box WRC Nyack, New York 10960 800-431-2808

Permission to reprint is available
upon request. Please contact:
World Relief Corporation/Refugee Services Division
P.O. Box WRC, Nyack, NY 10960
(914) 268-4135 (800) 431-2908

THE CHALLENGE OF SPONSORSHIP

INTRODUCTION

Refugees and the need for refugee resettlement have become permanent features in this world. Some refugees eventually have a chance to return to their place of origin or settle in geographically adjacent areas, but many refugees are in need of safe places to live and an opportunity to start new lives. Because the media confronts us daily with stories of human misery at home and abroad, such news rarely penetrates our minds deeply. Absorbed in our own daily lives, we tend to forget news and needs soon after the media coverage ends.

For those who do want to become involved, sponsorship of refugees offers an exciting opportunity. It is an experience that can be frustrating, rewarding and delightful, all at once: frustrating when the refugees do things differently than you had planned or wished, rewarding when you observe them becoming adjusted and self-sufficient through your help, and delightful when you emerge from sponsorship in a new meaningful relationship with someone who is very different from yourself. Most likely, sponsorship will also give you a new perspective on your own way of life. Because many people have sponsored refugees before you, you can benefit from their experiences and learn to maximize the joys and minimize the frustrations.

GOALS OF SPONSORSHIP

Whatever reasons for sponsoring you may have, giving the refugees freedom and leading them to self-sufficiency should be two primary goals. The awareness that your agreement to sponsor enabled your refugees to leave behind a life without a future and become free to start again will shield you from unnecessary frustrations should your refugees decide to move away from your area soon after arrival. This does happen sometimes, especially when the refugees have relatives living elsewhere in the United States. Blood-ties, which in many countries are stronger than in America, add to the loneliness and difficulties new refugees face after arrival and lead some to forsake good jobs and well-established lives in order to be close to relatives. If your refugees move

away, instead of feeling disillusioned that your attempt to be a good sponsor has come to naught, and dicapppointed over the seeming lack of gratitude, rejoice that your refugees felt so free so soon. Whether they stay two days, two weeks or two years, you will have achieved at least one of your two main goals: you will have given them freedom.

Though your heart may be open to assisting any person in need, you benefit from the careful selection of your family or individual refugee. If your family is the only one from a particular country in your area and you do not speak their language, one member of the refugee family should at least be literate. Without frequent access to interpreters, a bi-lingual dictionary is a must. Likewise, if relevant, your refugees' occupational skills should match employment possibilities in your region. For example, if you have a choice between a tailor and a fisherman, and you live inland, take the tailor. Past experience, however, does not always translate into American job skills--the refugees' vocational background may bear no relationship to their job, especially their first job, in the United States.

Resettlement agencies, like WORLD RELIEF, appreciate your careful consideration of environment and resources and stands ready to give advice when needed.

PREPARATION FOR ARRIVAL

Prior to your refugees' arrival you can prepare yourself by learning about their country. Such knowledge will not necessarily provide you with the skills to handle all difficult situations later, but your interest in their background will contribute positively to your relationship with your refugees. Refugees from all educational levels feel pleased and flattered when they discover that you are knowledgeable about their country.

While you read up on the history, culture, politics and the circumstances of refugees leaving the particular country (reading available WORLD RELIEF ethnic profiles may be a good beginning in this endeavor), try to realize that people from that culture not only <u>are</u> different, but that they will also <u>remain</u> different. Yes, they will learn about American ways and modify their behavior when with Americans, but they rarely want to, and perhaps do not have to, change their entire lifestyle. If, for example, they feel better sleeping on the floor, they can do so and be no less free or self-sufficient than when sleeping in an American style bed.

Existing manuals spell out the various functions of a sponsor. Make sure you have some kind of support group since the tasks are time-consuming. It is a good idea to take a vote through which your support group formally states its commitment to sponsorship in order to avoid the possibility of being left alone later.

Experienced sponsors advise not to go overboard with advance preparations, not to worry about the apartment being less than perfect, or the first job not being ideal. If at all possible, seek out other nationals in the area and ask for their help. Former refugees can give you the best idea of what will really be needed, and usually love to give advice. By calling on them, you are also enlarging your future support group. A certain insight and sensitivity may be necessary when seeking help among the larger refugee community in your area. Refugees from a given country may be divided by ethnic background, political association or social classes and may not be equally disposed to helping each other across these lines.

Other resources can be beneficial to your refugees when they arrive. There is a large variety of foreign language broadcasts, and many foreign language newspapers and magazines are published in this country. Find out what is available in your refugees' language. The psychological benefits will easily offset the small cost of subscribing to a paper or magazine which provides access to news about fellow countrymen, about their concerns in the United States, or about recent developments in their home country.

SPONSOR-REFUGEE RELATIONSHIP

One sponsor recalled being overly nervous on the day of her first refugees' arrival, but she got a good start by being open about her feelings. She told the refugee family that if they were scared about being refugees, she was scared about being a sponsor, and would probably make quite a few mistakes. You may be aware that certain customs are considered offensive in a particular culture (for example, stroking the head of a Cambodian or Vietnamese child), but if these gestures are so much a part of you that you would be uptight about having to remember them constantly, don't try. Rather, assure your family that you do not intend to offend them. They will find out very quickly that American customs are different and learn to cope.

If your refugees come from a country where hierarchical relationships dominate, their initial dependence on you places you immediately into the role of a superior who needs to be obeyed and pleased at all costs. A mere suggestion coming from you often has the effect of a command. Some refugees are quick to put their sponsors into a "father/mother" role--sometimes actually calling them "father" or "mother." While this label is not necessarily harmful, it sometimes leads sponsors to inadvertently treat their refugees like children who need to be told what they must do (e.g. take the job the sponsor found), and what they must not do (e.g. buy expensive meat).

Refugees are not weak and helpless people who are unable to make decisions. They may be unfamiliar with many of the conveniences of modern life, but they do

not lack intelligence. In fact, most refugees would not have made it out of their country, through a refugee camp, and into a third country had they not been extremely resourceful, independent and strong. These qualities will remain and help them through their adjustment period and beyond.

A simple way to convey the message that your refugees are in control of their lives is to let them make decisions, or better still, "choices," which sounds less definite and leaves the door wide open for a change of mind. Thus, refugees will be able to choose whether or not to take a job, whether or not to buy expensive meat, and to bear the consequences of their decisions. For instances where there really is no choice, as, for example, getting a social security card, you still offer a choice by asking whether they would like to go to the office today or tomorrow, in the morning or afternoon.

In any advice you give, always remain considerate of the refugees' culture. Acknowledging the existence and effectiveness of certain customs in the home country may be appropriate even when you do not think highly of the particular practice involved. You lose nothing by noting, "Oh, that probably worked great in your country, but here we have something else that works just as well, or even better..." Often this is enough to encourage them to at least try your way, though at another time they may revert to their own methods. For example, a Vietnamese person may try a western medicine instead of relying on their special form of massage (which leaves bruises) to combat a common cold.

Respect is the key to a good sponsor-refugee relationship. Some sponsors always try to imagine what they would feel like as refugees in a foreign culture, and then treat their refugees the way they would like to be treated in a similar situation. For example, if you think you would feel uncomfortable without any money in your pocket even though your rent and food are taken care of, why not give your refugee a few dollars after arrival? It will be enough to buy a toy for a child, a picture, or a newspaper. They may not buy anything at all, but the choice will be theirs.

When putting yourself into the refugees' shoes, you might also find that you do not particularly like to be talked about by others while you stand by, even when you do not understand what is being said. You might also feel better if introduced as a "friend from America" than referred to as an "American refugee" (in some countries the term "refugee" actually has a highly derogatory connotation). These are the kinds of things to remember when your refugees are with you. If people sense an inherent human equality between themselves and the person helping them, matters of different behavior lose their importance and do not jeopardize the quality of a relationship as easily.

While many of the time-consuming tasks can be farmed out to a group of people, you, the most dedicated and perhaps strongest member of the group, will be needed to serve as the protector of your refugees' rights when people try to make their lives difficult. If a narrow-minded neighbor harasses your refugees

because of their background, or landlords discriminate in renting housing, your refugees will not be aware that there is anything they can do about it. Even if they did know, chances are they would remain quiet and try to be as inconspicuous as possible. They would not want their names to be known to the authorities. You can assure them that in America we have official channels through which we can work, and that you are strong and can handle such matters in your name.

Similarly, if a particular English class is such that your refugees waste their time by attending, let them know that you may be able to have them placed into another class without the teacher ever finding out that they had requested it. Nobody will lose face (an important consideration for many refugees).

At the same time that you indicate your willingness to assist your refugees when it is in your power to do so, you must also delineate the limits of your ability or willingness. Some refugees accord such power and omnipotence to the sponsor that they actually wonder whether their sponsor will have to go to jail for them, should they do something wrong. You will want to point out that you are not legally responsible for them and that if they get themselves into legal trouble through unlawful acts, there is nothing you can do for them. You may pay them a friendly visit in jail, but you cannot and do not want to bribe them out (as bribery is a common practice in many countries).

Occasionally, there might be a refugee who not only thinks the sponsor to be omnipotent, but also considers him or her so rich that goods and financial favors should be coming forth continuously. It is unlikely that you will encounter this kind of problem. A clear definition of what you will do for your refugees as part of your orientation during the first few weeks will probably be sufficient to put your relationship onto the right track.

ORIENTATION

Some refugees need very little orientation. They are familiar with western ways of living and only need to be told where to do things, not how to do them. They are prepared to start off with a low-level job and work their way up. Other refugees need to learn everything, from living in a modern apartment to how to hold a job.

Orientation is most effective when provided in installments. Newcomers to this country tend to be so overwhelmed by surroundings, language and people that they are unable to absorb too much information all at once. Even if they do understand some English, a constant array of vital information raining down on them is exhausting at best.

Perhaps the most important function of sponsorship in the refugees' orientation is sitting down with the adults in the refugee family and discussing what they expect out of life in America. Earlier misinformation and misconceptions may surface at this time: education, thought to be free, can be expensive; jobs, available to them, are not abundant nor do they pay well; past experience does not translate into job skills in this country, etcetera.

Unfortunately, many refugees, especially those who spent a prolonged period of time in refugee camps, may have been exposed to various rumors about the promised land of America, one of them being that one does not need to work because there is this wonderful thing called welfare. Unless your refugees are well prepared to take a job and find one quickly, some talk about the meaning of welfare is probably necessary.

Refugees need to know that welfare is not there for the taking, but is meant for people who cannot support themselves through a temporary crisis. As a start for a new life, welfare may actually be detrimental because it does not lead to improvement. A job, however, can bring refugees in contact with Americans, help them with their language and understanding of society, establish a record of successful employment and create the foundation for better employment in the future.

For some refugees, welfare seems to fulfill the function of the extended family which, in the home country, helped members in economic need. In this case, welfare may not have any negative connotation in their minds. In fact, it may spare a particular refugee the loss of face within his own community which a low status job might incur. For other refugees, a non-working head of family suffers a certain loss of respect if he does not provide, or at least contribute to, the family's economic well-being through working.

Certain other topics which you might want to cover during the first few weeks may include drinking, gambling (especially if there are young men in your refugee group), and birth control. Many refugees recognize very quickly that raising children in this country is expensive, but they are unfamiliar with any form of birth control. Naturally, you will assure them that you will be happy if they have another child, but if they want information about birth control, offer to make an appointment with a doctor.

Sponsor and the sponsored benefit from the refugees' becoming independent as soon as possible. There is rarely the need to repeatedly accompany refugees on the bus to make sure they get to their destination. Even if they should get lost, they have survived life-threatening circumstances and are adults--they will find a way to get home and will have learned from the experience. This is not to suggest that you need not be concerned about their safety, but is meant to caution against overprotectiveness.

If your refugees come from male dominant societies, orientation may be more effective if it is provided by a man. A woman's word sometimes does not receive the same respect.

ADJUSTMENT TO LIFE IN AMERICA

Conflict between independence and control: Refugees from a communist country may dislike that political system, but if they have lived under communism for many years they are likely to be accustomed to, and to take for granted, many of its components. They expect that many decisions are made for them and that they will be taken care of by the state. They are used to the government determining their level of education and kind of employment, to a degree that they may expect a job to be waiting for them when they step off the plane, or, if there is none waiting, that someone will line one up within a short span of time. Because the state provided job security and insurance in their home country, they are unfamiliar with such issues as lay-offs, unemployment and medical bills and frequently lack the strong initiative necessary to benefit from the freedom and opportunities inherent in the American system. More generally, they need to adjust to the freedom of choice in America, which includes the freedom to make profits, but also the freedom to be poor.

Language: Most major studies on refugee adjustment point to language as the main hurdle to successful resettlement. During recent years an increasing number of refugees have been entering the United States with little or no English. Acquisition of English depends on educational background, age, as well as other circumstantial factors over which sponsors have no control. Because of the tremendous importance of language to all other areas of adjustment, such as finding and keeping a job, or to a general social well-being. sponsors will want to pay a great deal of attention to the refugees' progress in learning English.

Many people are apprehensive about having to learn a new language at an age when it does not come easily. They might be even more apprehensive about being in class if in their country going to class was something that only children did. Many adult refugees find it embarrassing to be in class with younger people who owe them respect, yet are faster learners. Equally uncomfortable is the feeling that can arise when a husband is in the same class with his wife. Because he is considered the superior, he must not lose face by learning more slowly than she does. Women, moreover, may be accustomed to remaining silent in the presence of men and also feel uncomfortable being in a mixed class.

If any of the above factors apply to your situation, try to take them into consideration when making arrangements for language instruction. Sometimes individual tutoring is a viable solution.

Religion: When the motivation to sponsor grows out of Christian love for one's fellow human being, there is a tendency to pressure refugees toward our convictions. It is good to know that a sponsor's love and concern are the result of religious commitment, but refugees should not feel pressured to adopt those beliefs. Let them know that they are always welcome in your church, but try to refrain from repeated invitations. Remember that a sponsor's suggestion often has the effect of a command.

The beliefs your refugees hold may have helped them survive, and in many instances are the strengths they will depend on through their adustment period.

Interpersonal relationships: People in many countries do not voice their opinions as frankly as is commonly the case in America. Maintaining harmonious relationships may override other goals, such as achieving individual results, and frequently leads people to say what the other party wants to hear, rather than what they think.

If your refugees come from such a background, simple questions like "Do you like pizza...this house...that coat...?" are likely to produce only affirmative answers. Therefore you fare better by habitually asking choice questions such as "Do you prefer this apartment or the other?", or, "Is it better to meet you in the morning or in the afternoon?" In addition, when you have to deny a request made by them, try to soften it as much as you can. A newly arrived refugee might find a direct "no" humiliating.

People in societies where human relationships are cultivated with utmost care sometimes shy away from accepting presents, favors, or invitations in order to evade the obligation that comes from accepting. If I accept your invitation I will owe you something, sometime. It may be easier to find an excuse for not accepting and come out debt-free. By the same token, a present or favor extended (and accepted) can be a conscious move by the giver toward gaining something from the recipient in the future.

Because of this kind of reciprocity in giving, sponsorship places a tremendous obligation on many refugees and accounts for their perceived need to please you, obey you and accommodate each and every request or suggestion.

Family relationships: In many societies, family relationships are considerably closer than ours. People will not necessarily engage in activities as a family. Actually, they may do less of that than the American counterpart, but in making decisions, such families are likely to think as a unit and on behalf of the unit. They also stand ready to help any relative in need, including relatives from a brother to distant cousins, aunts and uncles.

People to whom the well-being of the family group is of prime importance may sense American family relationships to be cold and void of emotions. These

refugees will only gradually understand that the relatively shallow relationships among Americans stem from an emphasis on individual freedom and accomplishment.

Food: Some newcomers perceive such American coldness to go right into the food offered at times of hospitality. American hosts planning a luscious meal for their guests commonly prepare a generous, but given amount per guest. Polite hosts also refrain from pressuring their guests into taking several helpings. If an offer for more food is turned down, they assume the guests to be truly satisfied.

In many countries hospitality is different. Hosts are likely to prepare quantities of food that guaranteee large amounts of left-overs. They inundate guests with food and urge them to eat as an expression of welcome. A host rarely takes a guest's first or second refusal to take more food seriously. In fact, he would be considered rude if he agreed too readily.

In general, any visitor, however unexpected the arrival, however inconvenient or brief the stay, is made to feel welcome with food or drink.

Most refugees prefer to cook as much of their own familiar food as feasible. Once in a while, however, a family may be so eager to become American that they consume an excessive amount of junk food, unaware that it lacks proper nutritional value and is unduly expensive. If you notice such a tendency in your family, help them understand that other American food or their own is healthier as an everyday diet.

CONCLUSION

The difference between cultures can be great. Though misunderstandings between you and your refugees may occasionally lead to difficulties, the burden of adustment is upon them. The process will be gradual and take time, but you can participate through understanding and help with advice.

When you explain American patterns that they must learn, you do not need to do so in terms of good and bad, superior and inferior ways of doing things. Remember that they are simply different. Every society has its own ways of doing things and there are advantages and disadvantages to each.

Refugees have lost their homeland and are likely to cling to familiar habits for reassurance. Many not only feel the loss of family and friends, but miss close relationships with the people living around them. Sponsorship presents a wonderful opportunity for you and for them to establish a new relationship, a friendship in which teaching and learning, giving and receiving are mutual.